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The Harmonious Development of Civilizations and the Role of Universities

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It is a great honor and a pleasure to be given an opportunity to address distinguished participants at the Beijing Forum 2008, held here, the historical venue of the Diaoyutai State Guest House. I also would like to extend my gratitude to the people at Peking University, who have worked hard to organize and prepare for this event.

The Forum this year, under the theme of “The Harmony of Civilizations and Prosperity for All—The Universal Value and the Development Trend of Civilization,” will explore, through five panels, how we can achieve harmonious development of human civilizations and cultures based on the universal value, while maintaining the diversity and preserving the global environment.

As the premise for such discussions, we must first recognize a major trend in the 21st Century: the shrinking Earth with a finite size. Until recently, the Earth has been viewed as being boundless with inexhaustible resources and unlimited capacity for recovery. The impact of our activities was miniscule compared to the enormous size of our mother Earth.

However, the dramatically expanded human activities are now overwhelming the Earth and forcing it to shrink, relative to the increased impact of human activities. In addition, as a result of the advancement of globalization, from the latter half of the 20th century, we have seen major increases in the flows of people, money and commodities across national borders, with unprecedented freedom. More important, information now flows across the world instantaneously. As clearly exemplified by the rapid propagation of the current financial crisis started in the U.S. to the rest of the world, our economic activities have become truly global, and so have our cultural and social and academic activities.

Now, we have to face the finite Earth. This, in turn, has brought about the emergence of serious, global-scale problems including the environmental deterioration, resource depletion, and so on. A vital example is the fact that the CO₂ emitted by our affluent civilization is now causing the global warming, which needs our immediate attention.

Thus, when we consider the harmonious development of the civilization, we need to explore the ways to achieve the sustainable harmonies between the human civilization and the finite Earth.

Needless to say, in the harmonious development of the civilization, one civilization or culture cannot prosper at the cost of others. On the contrary, diverse civilizations and cultures need to develop in harmony based on deep mutual understanding and respect.

Thus, in promoting global sustainability, we should keep in mind one critical factor: the cultural diversity. For example, a number of measures are being considered to combat the global warming. Each of these measures itself is a universal solution based on knowledge developed in a number of specialized fields. However, these solutions need to be integrated in such a way to best fit the ecological, social and cultural characteristics of each locality.

In other words, establishing global sustainability is achieved only through the methodology of integration uniquely fitted to the culture and civilization of each locality. Stated differently, the respect for cultural diversity must be the base for the establishment of global sustainability.

Now, what would be the role of universities?

First, universities need to achieve the “structuring of knowledge” to integrate pieces of knowledge in a way useful to solving the issues we face. Second, we should play the role of the “driving engine” for the social changes through Knowledge Innovation. Third, we should use university campuses as the base for social experiment. On top of these, our forth role is to maintain cultural diversity in the wave of globalization.

Before I explain these four roles of universities, I would first like to remind you that the problems we face today are all complex and intertwined.

Here is a very vivid example, which is on-going today. To combat the global warming, the replacement of fossil fuels with bio-fuels is being promoted, which, however, has triggered a serious global “grain crisis.” As this shows, solving one problem could cause another, making the simultaneous achievement of a number of important initiatives a difficult challenge, including the reduction of CO₂ emissions, the establishment of nature-harmonious resource-circulating society, poverty eradication and maintenance of cultural diversity.

In tackling these complex and intertwined issues, in addition to conventional basic science, we must also strive to create interdisciplinary and practical sciences as well.

Unfortunately, however, universities are not truly prepared to take on this task effectively. As a result of the explosive increase in knowledge of 20th century scholarship, it has become extremely difficult to stay abreast of the massive amounts of available knowledge in a comprehensive and systematic fashion. This, in turn, has caused not only the subdivision but also the compartmentalization of scholarly research. Many researchers have retreated into the “compartments” of their own specialized fields. In this way, we are finding ourselves driven into corners in which we are unable to put all of the available wisdom and information to effective use.

This leads me to the first role of universities: the “Structuring of Knowledge.” This is the process to fully integrate and mobilize the fragmented knowledge compiled in numerous compartmentalized fields in the way useful to solving the complex and intertwined problems we face. The process of the “Structuring of Knowledge,” in turn, could further promote international cooperation between researchers in many different fields.

Second, we need to forge a new process which we call “Knowledge Innovation,” that will enable more extensive and forward-looking collaborations between universities and the society, thereby supporting universities to act as the driving engine for academic, social and economic changes.

Up to now, university-government, university-industry and other forms of collaborations have been used to generate new knowledge, which universities have then channeled to society. In these collaborative activities, universities’ roles have tended to be reactive, which is not enough any more.

Although not fully developed yet, “Knowledge Innovation” is a proactive, interactive, action-oriented and self-creating process, based on collaborations between universities and society.

Third is the role of universities as a “social experiment platform,” in which I mean that university campuses can be experiment stations on sustainability based on university-society collaborations.

I myself studied environmental issues, from an academic perspective as an expert in energy engineering. Today, as President of the University of Tokyo, I am also working to realize a sustainable local community, with the university as the hub, from a practical perspective. We use one of our campuses as the base for creating a sustainable future city, based on cooperation with citizens, local governments and business corporations. In addition, we have started a sustainable campus initiative to reduce our own CO₂ emissions.

With universities acting as such experiment grounds, it is possible to reflect the natural, economic, social and cultural conditions of the locality on the creation of local models fitted for the local characteristics. Examining the results of the experiment, we can then go on to evolve the local modes into global models. At the same time, this can be used to teach students the attitudes and skills essential for attaining sustainable societies in the future.

Finally, our fourth mission is to maintain cultural diversity in the wave of globalization. Universities have to date played an important role in maintaining cultural diversity in research and education. In addition, today’s universities are required to make further effort to promote cultural social and intellectual diversities.

There is a widespread misunderstanding that globalization requires regional cultures to align with so-called “global culture,” thereby acting to standardize all world cultures. On the contrary, along with the advance of globalization, we also see an awakening of the awareness of regional diversity.

Exchanges among universities have been increasing with more students and researchers from countries and regions with variety of cultures, religions and languages on campuses. Universities not only need to be open to diverse society but also embrace diversity in themselves. It is the dynamism through co-operations and struggles

arising from the diversity that creates new knowledge. This dynamism will also empower us to mount broad and flexible responses to our challenges—even those that mankind has never experienced in the past.

Universities, an intellectual microcosm, should be a true microcosm of society where researchers and students with diverse backgrounds gather together. Only in such an environment, are human resources with a broad vision across nations and regions nurtured.

Next, I would like to touch on the role of networks. Up to now, inter-university exchanges have been conducted between numerous universities for the sake of academic and cultural interactions. In tackling the problems of global sustainability, for example, based on the recognition that individual universities cannot handle these issues on their own, inter-university networks have been established, linking numerous different fields.

However, to make these networks function more effectively, we must move in the direction of establishing schemes to forge mutual linkages between these existing networks. This is the process that we refer to as the “Network of Networks.” By building such a network of networks, I believe it will become possible to work to engineer interdisciplinary cooperation among universities around the world, and to help develop civilizations and cultures unique to their localities, while contributing to the development of global civilization and culture at the same time.

To succeed on this front, it is essential that this “Network of Networks” be used to cement the bonds among research institutions not only in the industrialized countries, but also in the developing nations.

Networking is also important for university education. Just yesterday, we held the President’s Conference for “BESETOHA”, the East Asia Four Universities Forum. This is a network comprising the University of Tokyo of Japan, Peking University of China, Seoul National University of the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam National University in Hanoi.

At that gathering, we addressed the topic of educational exchange. Through the use of the existing network, these four universities have compiled a steady stream of exchanges towards forming common cultures in the region, while recognizing and respecting our differences, and working to mutually compensate for our respective shortcomings.

For research and education, each member university brings to the table local problems and solutions, based on the conditions in their respective countries. This opens the door to the promotion of cooperation and constructive approaches to the problems of the region of East Asia, with the results utilized in the research and educational programs of each university.

I am confident that the attempt to develop the Network of Networks will play an effective role in linking our network with other networks in the world to disseminate the fruits of our collaborations to the world.

At BESETOHA, we also hold student panel discussions. Last year, for example, students from the four member universities discussed joint efforts to deal with the environmental problem, in light of the cultural traditions of the East Asia region. Universities need to nurture students with global views beyond the country or the region they live, understand the cultures of other nations or regions while at the same time holding local or regional viewpoints.

The student interactions made possible by networking will help cultivate future generations determined to take on the challenge of dealing with the problems of the human kind across the borders of nations and regions.

Today, I have talked about what universities need to do in achieving the harmonious development of civilization, based on the premise of the shrinking Earth. Before concluding my talk, I would like to briefly touch on another prominent trend in the 21st century: the Ageing Society. The Ageing Society is an inevitable consequence of the advancement of civilization, enabled by the dramatic improvement of medical treatments and the declining birth rate. We must be prepared for living on the finite Earth in the Ageing Society: the situation created as a result of the advancement of our own civilization. This is why we must act now.

This Beijing Forum, held here in Beijing of China, which enjoys rich and diverse cultures, is a unique opportunity for the exchanges and co-operations among researchers of the world. I hope the discussions held here will generate and disseminate substantial results to the world.

As fellow passengers on the Spaceship Earth—a planet that has become a finite entity—let us join in the quest to build a new and sustainable future.

Thank you.